

DRAFT Environmental Assessment

Lincoln Ranch Acquisition

Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks, Region 4
Habitat Montana & State Parks Access Montana
Proposed Project



June 2008



**Montana Fish,
Wildlife & Parks**

PREFACE

In 2007, local rancher and wilderness enthusiast, Charlie Lincoln passed away. In his estate, he bequeathed his ranch to the diocese of Helena with the stipulation that if the Archdiocese decided to sell the ranch, Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks (FWP) would be given the right of first refusal to meet the highest offer.

Mr. Lincoln's ranch incorporates a variety of habitats supporting numerous game and non-game species, fourteen miles of the Marias River still in a natural free flowing state with a variety of native and sport fish species, unique geological and cultural resources, and recreational potential for diverse users groups. The most obvious feature of this property is the undeveloped, natural conditions found throughout. There are few if any river bottom properties like this left in north-central Montana. The contiguous size absent of development, owned on both sides of a major river, and the virtually unchanged pre-European landscape is rare. FWP has prepared this environmental assessment in the likelihood FWP exercises its right to purchase and proceed with acquisition.

1.0 PURPOSE OF AND NEED FOR ACTION

1.1 Proposed Action And Need

FWP proposes the acquisition of approximately 7,540 acres in fee title and continued leasing of 1,325 contiguous acres of important wildlife habitat along the Marias River. The Lincoln Ranch encompasses riparian, sagebrush-grassland and cottonwood gallery forest habitat communities that support an abundance of game and non-game species. The Marias River meanders through the property with numerous oxbows. Aquatic habitat favors many native and non-native fish species. If FWP acquires this property, recreational uses are almost unlimited. Fishing, hunting, river recreation, developed and semi-primitive camping, hiking, cultural and natural history interpretation, wildlife viewing, and other possible compatible uses would provide Montanans and visitors unique recreational opportunities. The wide range and quality of recreational opportunities in one location is rare and will provide Wildlife, Fisheries and Parks an exceptional opportunity to co-manage natural and recreational resources.

In addition to the open space on the ranch, this acquisition would provide public access to 1,840 acres of currently inaccessible, adjacent public lands owned by the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) and Department of Natural Resource Conservation (DNRC).

The property would be purchased with funds from a variety of sources including the FWP Habitat Montana Program, State Parks Access funds, various non-governmental organizations, and conservation and sportsman groups. All have committed to assist FWP in the purchase and to add this property to public ownership. A final price will not be set until a bid process has been completed.

Imminent threat exists to this pristine area because of the property's scenic location enveloping the Marias River and in view of the Rocky Mountains; accordingly this ranch has caught the attention of developers and private investors. If those individuals purchased the property for

development of exclusive private use, the public could be excluded from access to an area with abundant public natural resources and recreational opportunities.

1.2 Objectives

In proposing to acquire the Lincoln Ranch, FWP seeks to meet the following needs:

- Protect and enhance riparian, sagebrush grasslands, and cottonwood gallery habitats;
- Protect in perpetuity 14 miles of the Marias River and its water-borne resources;
- Manage wildlife and fisheries habitat in a sustainable manner to support priority fish and wildlife species;
- Propose reestablishment of fish species native to the Marias River;
- Provide public access to over 10,700 acres of continuous habitat that is currently inaccessible for recreational uses;
- Provide opportunity and access for public hunting, fishing, wildlife viewing, hiking, non-motorized boating, and opportunity for other public recreational users;
- Protect wildlife habitat and fisheries resource from incompatible land uses or development and potentially loss of public access to those resources;
- Promote a river and ground based state park that provides multiple levels and options of recreational opportunities;
- Develop and provide educational interpretive programs that promote and inspire responsible outdoor recreation, preservation of important natural and cultural resources, and appreciation of park values;
- Promote tourism through recreation opportunities that will benefit local communities;
- Identify and preserve important cultural, heritage, geologic, and paleontologic resources;
- Manage as a cooperative and combined WMA and State Park.

1.3 Location

Located 8 miles southwest of Shelby and 70 miles northwest of Great Falls in Pondera and Toole Counties, the Property falls within FWP administrative Region 4. See Figure 1 for overview map of property and Figure 2 for aerial photo showing the property boundary.

1.4 Landownership

The property consists of 8,866 contiguous acres (7,540 deeded, 492 state school trust, and 833 acres BLM) on both the north and south sides of the Marias River. There are approximately 14 miles of river frontage on the Marias River within the property. See *Appendix A* for an aerial map of the ranch. The ranch is bordered on the south and west by an additional 588 acres of currently inaccessible State School Trust land. See Figure 3 for an overview of adjacent property ownership.

1.5 Legal Descriptions

Pondera County		
Township, Range	Section	Legal Description
T31NR03W	8	Lot 2
T31NR03W	16	LOT 14, S2SW4
T31NR03W	17	LOTS 4,5,7,8,10,11,13,14, S2SE4
T31NR03W	18	LOTS 3, 6, 8, 9, 10, 11, SW4NE4, E2SW4, W2SE4, NE4SE4
T31NR03W	21	SE4SW4, S2SE4
T31NR04W	13	LOTS 4, 5, 8, 11, 12, E2SE4
T31NR04W	14	LOTS 4, 7, 10, 11
Toole County		
Township, Range	Section	Legal Description
T31NR03W	4	W2
T31NR03W	5	S2NE4, W2, SE4
T31NR03W	6	SE4NE4, E2SE4
T31NR03W	7	SW4NE4, S2NW4, S2
T31NR03W	8	N2, N2SW4, SW4SW4, LOT 3, N2SE4, LOT 1,SE4SE4
T31NR03W	9	W2NE4, NW4, S2
T31NR03W	10	SW4
T31NR03W	14	SW4SW4
T31NR03W	15	LOTS 1-8, NW4, NW4SW4, W2NE4SE4
T31NR03W	16	LOTS 1, 2, 6, 8, 9, 12, 15, N2NE4, SE4NE4, NE4SE4
T31NR03W	17	LOTS 2, 3, 6 & 9
T31NR03W	18	LOTS 1, 2, 4, 5, 7
T31NR03W	22	LOTS 1-8,10, W2SE4, SE4SE4, SW4NW4, SW4SW4
T31NR03W	23	S2NE4, NW4, NE4SW4, NW4SE4
T31NR03W	24	LOT 10, SW4NW4
T31NR03W	26	LOT 4
T31NR03W	27	LOTS 1,3,4
T31NR04W	10	S2SE4
T31NR04W	11	S2
T31NR04W	12	W2SW4, NE4SE4, S2SE4
T31NR04W	13	LOTS 1-3, 6, 7, 9, 10, NW4NE4, NE4NW4, S2NW4
T31NR04W	14	LOTS 1-3, 5, 6, 8, 9, 12, 15, N2NW4
T31NR04W	15	LOT 1
T31NR04W	23	LOT 1
T31NR04W	24	LOT 2

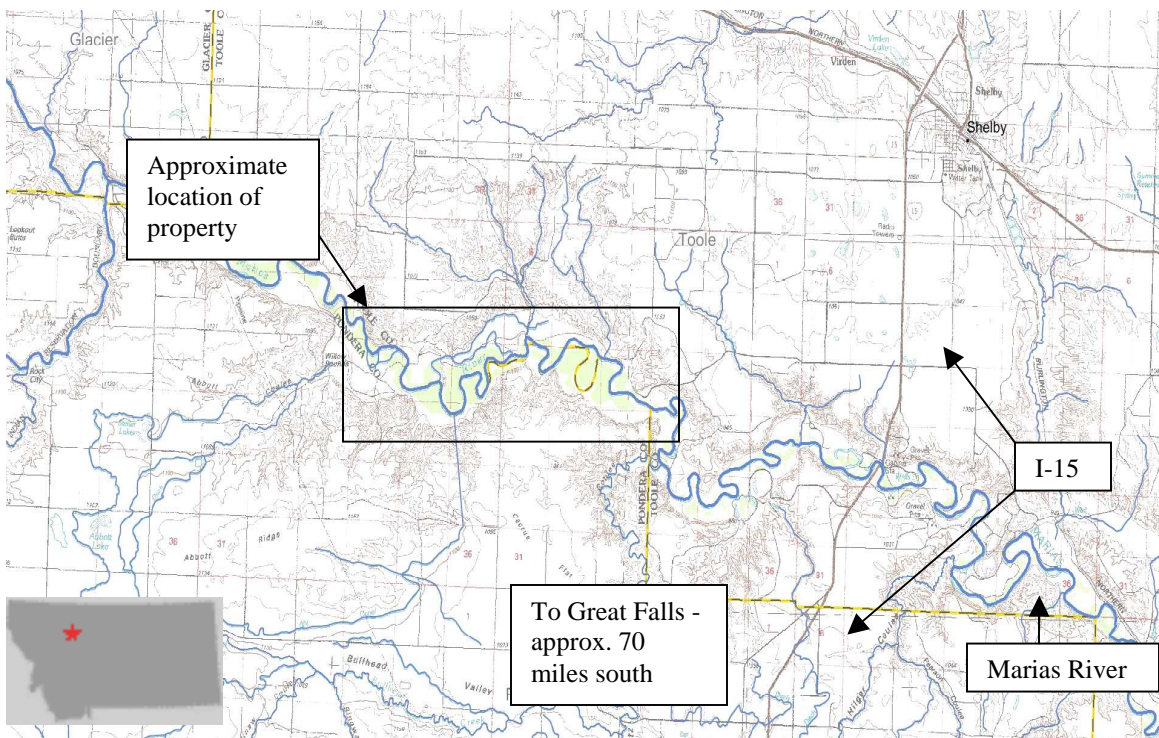


Figure 1: Overview Map of Subject Property

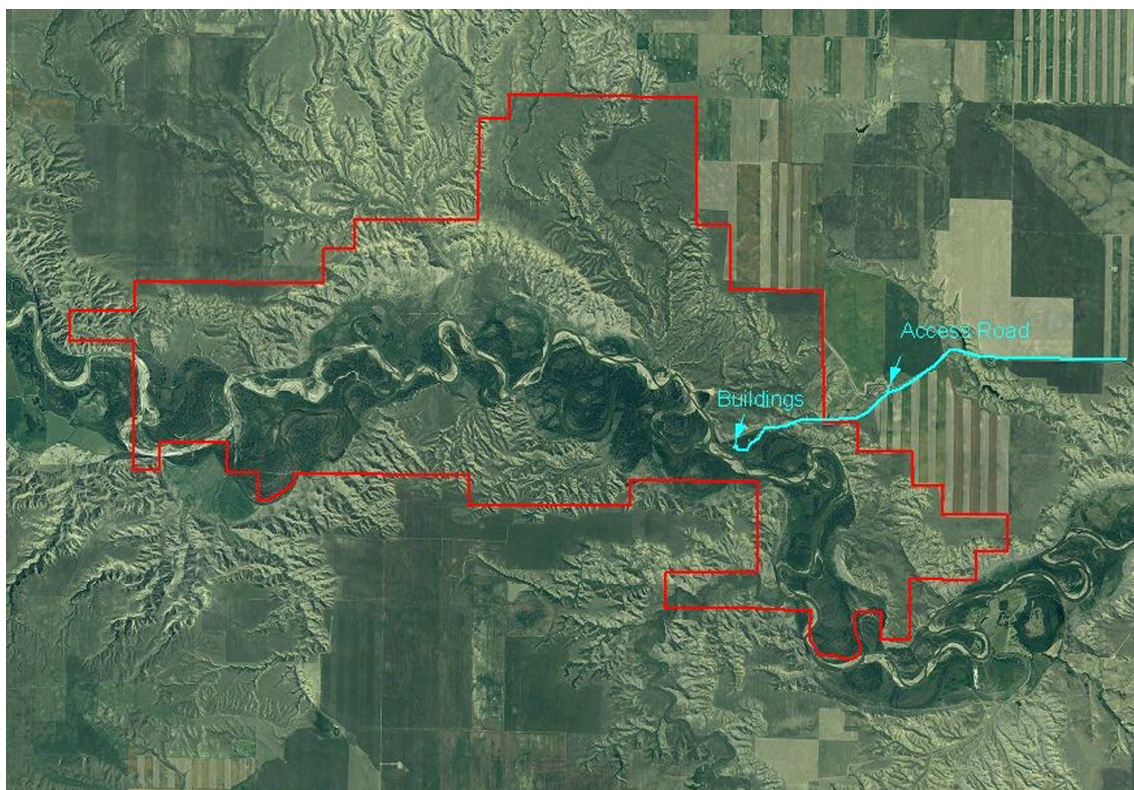


Figure 2: Aerial Photo of Subject Property

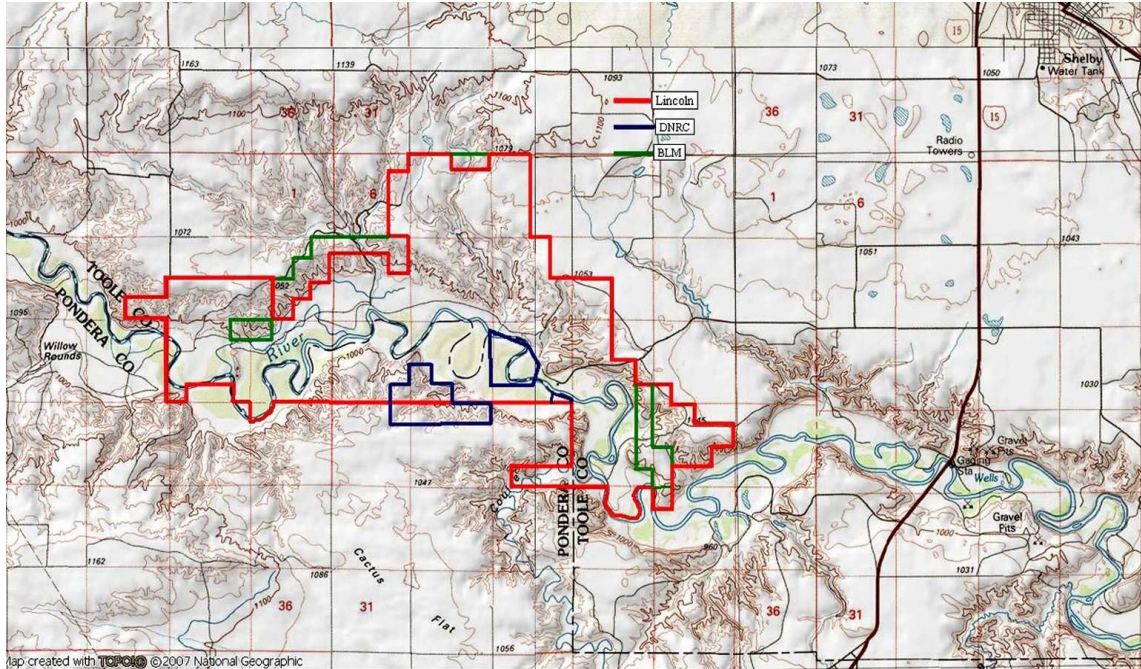


Figure 3: Overview of Adjacent Property Ownership

1.6 Application to FWP Habitat Montana Program

Habitat Montana is the Wildlife Division Program created by the 1987 Montana Legislature (HB526) to provide means to protect and enhance important ecological and wildlife habitats throughout Montana. It features three important habitat types as those in most need of protection. They include intermountain foothill, sagebrush-grassland, and riparian habitat types. The Lincoln Ranch clearly offers exceptional opportunity to protect and enhance the riparian and sagebrush-grassland communities. Significant funding for this project will be derived from the Habitat Montana Program.

1.7 Application to Access Montana State Parks Program

Multiple recreational opportunities and access to public lands are all consistent with the State Parks “Access Montana” legislation. Potential for scenic trails, a state park aligned with 14 miles of the Marias river corridor, significant cultural and historic features found throughout the property, and access to large block of public state and federal lands are why Parks Access Montana Funds may be utilized. FWP’s Parks Division is authorized by MCA 23-1-102 and 23-1-107 wherein FWP authority and duty is defined regarding the acquisition of lands by fee or donation as state historic sites and recreation areas.

1.8 Application to FWP Comprehensive Fish & Wildlife Management Strategy

There are three community types within the property that have been identified in the Comprehensive Fish & Wildlife Management Strategy (CFWCS, FWP 2005), Terrestrial Focus Area Montana Glaciated Plains as Community Types of Greatest Conservation Need. Those communities are riparian and wetland, mixed broadleaf, and sagebrush-grassland (Grassland Complexes).

Riparian and wetland communities support the highest concentration of plants and animals in Montana. This property contains fourteen linear miles of high quality riparian habitat along the Marias River. The mixed broadleaf forest is represented by the approximately 1,500 acres of unaltered cottonwood gallery. Thousands of acres of sagebrush-grassland habitat exist on the property.

There are over 300 vertebrate species found within the grasslands community type throughout Montana. The CFWCS lists the following Tier I Species of Greatest Conservation Need that may be found in mixed shrub and grassland communities: northern leopard frog, western hog-nosed snake, milksnake, greater sage-grouse, mountain plover, long-billed curlew, burrowing owl, spotted bat, Townsend's big-eared bat, pallid bat, black-tailed prairie dog, and meadow jumping mouse (FWP 2005).

In Montana, riparian habitats provide breeding and nesting areas for at least 134 (55%) of Montana's 245 species of breeding birds, as well as much-needed food and resting areas for migrating birds. There are 17 Tier I Species of Greatest Conservation Need that rely on riparian and wetland habitat for breeding and/or survival.

The unique diversity of these three community types provides habitats potentially supporting over two hundred species within the boundary of a single property.

The table below lists the CFWCS Tier1 species that are predicted to occur in the area of the property:

Common Name	Scientific Name
Bald Eagle	<i>Haliaeetus leucocephalus</i>
Mountain Plover	<i>Charadrius montanus</i>
Long-billed Curlew	<i>Numenius americanus</i>
Burrowing Owl	<i>Athene cunicularia</i>
Olive-sided Flycatcher	<i>Contopus cooperi</i>
Spotted Bat	<i>Euderma maculatum</i>
Townsend's Big-eared Bat	<i>Corynorhinus townsendii</i>
Pallid Bat	<i>Antrozous pallidus</i>
Meadow Jumping Mouse	<i>Zapus hudsonius</i>
Snapping Turtle	<i>Chelydra serpentina</i>
Spiny Softshell Turtle	<i>Apalone spinifera</i>
Western Hog-nosed Snake	<i>Heterodon nasicus</i>
Milksnake	<i>Lampropeltis triangulum</i>
Burbot	<i>Lota lota</i>

The table below lists the proportion of the property that fall within the various CFWCS Tier 1 Community Types:

Type	% Area
Riparian Wetland	31
Mixed Broadleaf (Cottonwood gallery)	10
Sagebrush & Grassland	59
Total	100

1.9 Authority

The following laws and rules are applicable to the proposed action:

Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks (FWP) undertakes this action by authority of MCA 23-1-102, defining FWP powers and duties regarding the acquisition of lands by fee or donation as state historical sites and recreation areas. The department may cooperate with other federal, state or local agencies to acquire, plan, establish, and maintain parks as authorized by MCA 23-1-107.

The Habitat Montana Program (12.9.509 ARM) seeks to acquire properties in order to conserve land, water and wildlife, to contribute to hunting and fishing opportunities, to contribute to non-hunting recreation, to protect open space and scenic areas, and to maintain the local tax base through payments in lieu.

FWP has the authority to purchase lands (MCA 87.1.209) that are suitable for game, bird, fish or fur-bearing animal restoration, propagation or protection; for public hunting, fishing, or trapping areas; and for state parks and outdoor recreation.

1.10 Management Considerations

Three divisions (Fisheries, Parks, and Wildlife) of FWP are working together to assist in the management of and are providing the funds for proposed acquisition. In the interest of protecting the natural and cultural resources within the property and clarifying often differing divisional goals for newly purchased FWP lands, a site management plan will be developed to articulate the cooperative management vision for the ranch.

2.0 ALTERNATIVES

2.1 Alternative A – Proposed Action:

Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks (FWP) proposes to exercise its' right of first refusal to purchase 7,540 acres in fee title and retain the current leases to 492 acres of state trust lands and 833 acres of BLM lands. FWP will negotiate lease agreements with both BLM and DNRC that will be agreeable and compatible with land uses of all parties. This project would conserve an important wildlife habitat area that includes riparian, sagebrush-grasslands and cottonwood gallery zones.

2.2 Alternative B – No Action:

Under the No Action Alternative, FWP would not exercise its' right of first refusal to pursue this acquisition, and would forgo the opportunity to purchase the Lincoln River Ranch. The Archdiocese of Helena would then sell the property to the highest bidder, likely being either a private investor or developer.

2.3 Alternatives C – Third Party Purchase with a FWP Conservation Easement:

Other private parties have expressed interest in this property. If the fee title purchase price of the property exceeds FWP's financial resources, FWP will investigate the possibility of collaboratively purchasing a conservation easement with the new owners provided interests of both parties could be met. FWP has established a long, effective and consistent track record of working with private landowners to protect and enhance important wildlife habitats while simultaneously maintaining private operating and productive ranches on the Montana landscape. If suitable terms of protection and use can be negotiated, it is conceivable that passage of the Lincoln Ranch into private ownership can be facilitated while simultaneously protecting important resource and recreational values on the property. Provisions of the Lincoln Will do not directly allow for or direct such an effort. Any such effort and result will be at the consent of the new private landowner.

3.0 AFFECTED ENVIRONMENT

3.1 Habitat

The three focus habitat types on this property are riparian and wetland, sagebrush grassland, and cottonwood gallery. The multi-layered plant canopy provided along the Marias River corridor provides a variety of nesting, resting, and foraging areas for wildlife.

The riparian habitat is very high quality with extensive stands of cottonwoods, intermixed with willow, buffalo berry, and other shrubs that surround the free flowing Marias River. There are 4 freshwater ponds within the property, which were created by old river oxbows, which provide ideal waterfowl breeding and brood rearing areas. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Wetland Database notes the property encompasses approximately 22 acres of freshwater forested/shrub wetland and approximately 127 acres of freshwater emergent wetland. The Marias River is a naturally functioning, unregulated river that contains both cool and cold-water fish species.

The sagebrush-grassland habitat in the uplands is extensive and high quality. Managed grazing has resulted in range conditions that are fair to good. The primary species are needle grass, wheatgrass, and blue grama with some sagebrush. Uplands consist of "breaks" interspersed with open bench lands. There are several drainages that are ideal escape terrain for mule deer.

There is approximately 16 acres that were historically tilled for alfalfa fields, but those have not been cultivated for approximately 30 years. Smooth brome is now present in those areas, thus offering opportunities in the future for renovation and restoration.

Current Condition of Habitat: Upland habitat is currently in fair to good condition. River bottom habitats are structurally complete, but show the effects of long term and continuous grazing practices. Boundary fences are in fair condition and will require immediate attention to address proper livestock grazing distribution on and off of the property. Interior fences are rare. Where present, they are generally in total disrepair.

In the river bottom and historically cultivated areas, noxious weeds are present. Leafy spurge is present throughout the floodplain corridor. Drier upland sites and travel corridors host spotted knapweed in localized situations. Other noxious weeds have yet to be identified and mapped.

3.2 Terrestrial Species

Currently, the Property provides habitat for at least 200 white-tailed deer, 200 mule deer, abundant pheasant, sharp-tailed grouse, Hungarian partridge, and less common, wild turkeys. The riparian vegetation community may provide nesting, resting, and foraging habitat for up to 134 native species of birds. The rocky outcrops along the river provide unique and finite habitat resources for many species of bats, birds and reptiles, including Townsend's big-eared bat, Northern myotis, milk snake, burrowing owls, and prairie falcons. Full inventory and monitoring efforts have yet to be undertaken to identify the presence of other potentially unidentified species

3.3 Aquatic Species

The Marias River is a naturally functioning, unregulated river that is inhabited by both cool and cold-water fish species. Sport fish present include burbot, northern pike, yellow perch, rainbow trout, brown trout, channel catfish, and walleye. Numerous non-game species known to be present include various minnow species, sculpin, longnose sucker, and white sucker. The river's riparian areas host numerous shorebirds, songbirds, waterfowl and amphibians, including the plains spadefoot and Great Plains toad.

3.4 Current Recreation Opportunities

Current public recreation opportunities are essentially nonexistent. The property was managed for the exclusive use of the owner. The potential for public recreation is tremendous. Variety of habitats and terrain features make this an exceptional area for many types of outdoor experiences.

3.5 Public Access

Currently two access routes to the property exist; one is on the northeastern corner and the other is on the northwestern corner.

The eastern most access point is via Lincoln Road, a designated Toole County Road. The status of a public right of way to the Lincoln Ranch property is being researched to determine if this will provide unrestricted public entry to the property.

The western most access point is a limited use easement through private property. FWP is researching this easement as it pertains to public use.

FWP will utilize all options to assure public access is available to the property along one of the current points of entry or research other access points where public use is unrestricted. Other

options include negotiating a public access with an adjacent landowner or investigating the potential acquisition of a right of way through adjacent property. If public access cannot be obtained, FWP will not acquire the property.

3.6 Buildings and Utilities

There are five buildings on the property, which includes a rustic residence, a pole barn, and 3 sheds. These buildings may not be in suitable condition for public use; they are in need of serious maintenance, repair or removal. All these buildings are located in close proximity to one another near the county road.

There are 4 producing gas wells and 2 abandoned/plugged on the property. Mr. Lincoln allowed the extraction activities and tapped into the resource for his domestic residential needs. All rights to develop and extract gas are held by other third party interests. FWP does not anticipate generating any revenues associated with mineral rights. FWP will research the possibility of obtaining all mineral rights for this property to minimize environmental and social impacts that may result from future gas or other mineral extraction.

4.0 ENVIRONMENTAL CONSEQUENCES

The following environmental analysis is limited to Alternative A (Preferred Action) and Alternative B (No Action). The reason for this is FWP does not know who the new owner would be (single purchaser vs. developer), what their plans for the property would be, and if they would be interested in entering into a conservation easement. Attempting to assess the anticipated environmental impacts for Alternative C with out additional information would be extremely difficult.

Traditionally, FWP's conservation easements look toward reaching a balance between the conservation of the property's natural resources (FWP's vision) and the property owner's objectives. Often FWP's conservation easements include language that prohibits activities that would negatively impact a specific species or specific habitat type for preservation and enhancement of open space, native plants and animals located on the Land, as well as the scenic values of the Land, but often these limitations do not interfere with the owner's normal activities on the property such as rest-rotation livestock grazing and crop production.

If FWP and the new owners agreed to a conservation easement, another environmental assessment would be prepared addressing that action and its impacts to the existing natural resources, since the environmental consequences are not know at this time.

4.1 Physical Environment

4.1.1 Land Resources

Proposed Action: Under the Proposed Action, there would be localized changes to the land resources (soils, geologic features, etc.) within the property. Potentially with the increased public access to an area that historically allow minimum public use, the indirect consequences of FWP obtaining the property could be a rise in soil disturbing activities by those visiting the site and moving into pristine areas (i.e. pioneering new trails). Because of the sandy and clay loam qualities of the soil, potentially new erosion patterns could easily be established, which could degrade exposed areas. FWP will attempt to discourage such actions through identification of authorized recreation activities with informational signs. FWP, under a management plan would develop a restricted foot print for a State Park, potential defined access areas and parking areas for hunting, fishing and other recreational users, and any livestock grazing will be strictly managed to reduce the risk of weed spread and other habitat degradation along riparian areas. In the near future, FWP anticipates development of recreational facilities that could include a campgrounds, visitor center, boat ramp, office, and staff residence. Prior to any such development, FWP will complete a separate environmental analysis of potential affects of any proposed development. Vegetative enhancements planned under the proposed action may decrease potential erosion.

No Action: Under the No Action Alternative, there is a high degree of likelihood that this property will be sold to a buyer that plans to either subdivide the acreage or maintain it solely for private recreational and other land based activities. Either of those plans would likely include soil-disturbing activities for construction of residences and/or new roads.

4.1.2 Air Quality

Proposed Action: Under the Proposed Action, there would be direct no changes to the ambient air quality. However, a potential indirect impact of FWP obtaining the property would be a minor increase in dust created by road travel to or within the parcel by FWP staff and visitors. FWP would provide appropriate maintenance to the road within the property to ensure public safety and when appropriate, apply dust-reducing elements to the road surface to reduce dust production. Currently, the primary public access road into the property is located very close to a private residence and dust production and reduction will likely be a concern of that owner.

No Action: Under the No Action Alternative, potentially the property's new owner could allow for land uses that could have negative effects to air quality, including construction of additional roads or the cultivation of new agricultural areas.

4.1.3 Water Resources

Proposed Action: Under the Proposed Action, water resources on or adjacent to this parcel will be maintained or enhanced by protecting riparian areas. There are no proposed changes that would result in increased discharge, changes in drainage patterns, alteration of the river course (including flooding), development in the floodplain, changes in the quality or quantity of groundwater. Existing water rights would be evaluated and if changes in water rights were proposed, a change process that protects other water users from adverse effects would be a

required process to complete. This includes the resources of Bull Creek (perennial stream), four freshwater ponds, and associated wetland areas of the Marias River.

No Action Alternative: If FWP decides not to exercise its right to purchase the property, it is unknown if any of the water resources (ponds, riparian areas) would be affected by the another buyer's plans.

4.1.4 Vegetation

Proposed Action: If FWP were to exercise its right to acquire the Lincoln Ranch, direct impacts to the current vegetation would be limited. The changes would focus primarily upon the control of noxious weeds, in particular leafy spurge. Currently there are approximately 20% of the total acres infected by leafy spurge. FWP would immediately implement its regional weed management plan to reduce the distribution and spread of noxious weeds by use of chemical, biological (i.e. insects, sheep, goats), and mechanical means. FWP would work with county weed district managers to initiate any weed control processes. By state law, FWP is required to manage noxious weeds on its properties. As a result of these measures, the quantity and quality of native vegetation on the land parcel is expected to improve.

Previously noted, the ranch included a limited number of acres allocated for the cultivation of alfalfa that because of neglect has been taken over by smooth brome. If FWP were to acquire the property, a potential management strategy on the property could include sharecropping of the historically cultivated areas. This would provide an economic benefit to the farmer and provide additional forage and cover for upland game birds and wildlife. Cultivated areas may show a decrease in noxious weed infestations.

Indirect impacts of the proposed action could be the spread of noxious weeds into additional areas by recreationists using the property, as well as the disturbance of native vegetation when visitors pioneer trails into the property's interior or in wetland areas in order to access the river.

No Action: By not exercising their right for purchasing the property, FWP could put a unique habitat community at risk of development that could negatively impact the vegetative resources on the ranch. The exact level of this risk is unknown since the future impacts to resources would be dependent on the desires of the property's new owner. The level of noxious weed control by another owner is unknown.

4.1.5 Fish & Wildlife Resources

Proposed Action: If FWP were to acquire the Lincoln ranch, management of the property would be for the benefit of its permanent and transient aquatic and terrestrial species. Direct impacts to species are expected to be minimal since FWP does not plan to implement any immediate changes to wetland, shrub or grassland habitats that would change the diversity of wildlife. However, long term improvements in habitat and management actions could increase the carrying capacity of wildlife species. Historically, hunting and trapping were allowed on the property on a limited basis. FWP would continue to permit these practices on a regulated basis. FWP will investigate the reintroduction of native fish species currently absent from this reach of the Marias River. This includes the blue sucker, river carpsucker, and shovelnose sturgeon. Fishing would be permitted on the property.

Indirect impacts of the proposed acquisition would be the likelihood FWP would repair boundary fencing that could be a minor impediment to migrating ungulates. Fences built would be of a wildlife friendly design. As part of its management plan for the property, FWP would encourage community-based groups to provide the hands-on presence to discourage unauthorized activities.

No Action: Due to the likelihood of development of this land parcel, aquatic and wildlife resources may be negatively impacted but at what level is unknown.

4.2 Human Environment

4.2.1 Noise and Electrical Effects

Proposed Action: The proposed acquisition may result in more people visiting the site, thus increasing the noise level within a localized area since the majority of the property is inaccessible by motorized vehicle. The proposed action will not create electrostatic effects that could be detrimental to human health or interfere with radio or television reception.

No Action: The potential for another buyer purchasing the property could result in development of the property, which could increase noise and electrical effects in the area.

4.2.2 Land Use

Proposed Action: Past and present, the Lincoln Ranch was/is an operating ranch for livestock production. Current livestock use is on a lease basis through estate management. Under the Proposed Action, the area will be maintained as a natural area with increased public access. Land use changes will reflect wildlife habitat enhancement and protection, State Park development, limited grazing, and diverse public recreational uses. Development may include a State Park campground with support facilities (maintenance shop, developed camp pads and parking areas, staff office and living quarters). Interpretive and cultural areas will have access trails and developed displays. Wildlife areas may include food plots to enhance specific wildlife species abundance, weed control to reduce impacts to native plant species, riparian habitat enhancement and limited hunter access corridors which may include parking areas.

Opportunities to continue or adjust livestock production on the Property will be explored. The proposed acquisition would not directly impact land uses of neighboring properties. Since there is the possible increase of traffic to the property, there could be minor negative impact to the nearest neighbor's residence because of dust and noise from passing vehicles, which would be addressed through management practices to minimize impacts to neighbors. Recreational use of the adjacent BLM and state trust lands would increase as a result of the acquisition by FWP providing access to those lands. FWP will work with the BLM & DNRC to maintain current grazing leases.

No Action: If another buyer than FWP were to acquire the ranch, the land use may change into a more developed area with potentially multiple private residences or new areas under cultivation. These activities could pose threats to wildlife and native vegetative resources, but at what level those threats would occur are unknown.

4.2.3 Risk and Health Hazards

Proposed Action: Under FWP management, pesticides could be used to reduce or eradicate noxious weeds on the property, as per the Region 4 Weed Management Plan. Trained, licensed professionals would conduct any weed treatment and storage/use of chemicals in accordance with proper operating procedures and label instructions to minimize potential unintended consequences to wildlife, vegetation, and visitors to the property.

As common practice, FWP would carry out a hazardous materials survey before completing the purchase of the property to identify any unseen public safety or wildlife hazards present on the property.

The Marias River bottom is within an active floodplain. FWP would not propose development of the river bottom where there was the potential of flooding or risks to public safety and will commit to maintaining natural channel function where no hard techniques of bank stabilization such as riprap will be utilized.

Inherent risks are associated with public recreation on a free flowing river. FWP would monitor the Marias River for significant hazards and provide educational materials and resources that promote safe and responsible river recreation.

No Action: If FWP did not purchase the property, it is unknown if any new risk or health hazards might occur.

4.2.4 Aesthetics, Community Impact & Recreation

Proposed Action: FWP acquisition of the ranch will protect the open space and viewshed of this portion of the Marias River corridor. Mr. Lincoln appreciated the scenic beauty and primitive values of his property, so the protection of this picturesque area would be in keeping with his vision.

Initially, it is expected that there would be minimal direct impacts to nearby communities (i.e. Shelby and Conrad). However, indirect impacts of the acquisition by FWP might be an increase in recreation-based or visitor businesses to accommodate the needs of the visitors accessing or recreating on the property.

New access to approximately 10,000 acres of public lands will greatly increase the potential for recreational activities at the property. For the immediate future, FWP would likely authorize the following recreational activities on a regulated basis on the property: hiking, angling, floating, horseback trail rides on designated trails, natural history exploration, photography, wildlife viewing, hunting, and trapping. Trapping (otter, bobcat, muskrat, beaver, and mink) and hunting (ungulates and game bird) activities had been allowed by Mr. Lincoln but only on a very limited basis. Trapping and hunting actions would follow FWP established rules and regulations.

Increased visitation and diverse recreational opportunities may result in social and experiential issues and potential user conflicts. FWP will strive to mitigate these potential impacts by applying a visitor use management program.

Activities associated with the State Park may require user fees in accordance with the State Parks Biennial Fee Rule. These fees would provide important earned revenue to support the State Park program.

Activities that meet the criteria for FWP Commercial Use Rules ARM 12.14.101 would also be regulated and fees assessed according those rules.

Additionally, with opening any new area to public use, there is the potential for vandalism. Vandalism diminishes aesthetic and recreation values of any property on which it occurs. As previously noted, FWP will likely establish a community-based group to monitor the site and provide an on-site presence to deter unauthorized activities from occurring.

No Action: There is the potential for a small, short-term economic benefit through housing construction and real estate sales if the property was sold to a developer for ranchettes. Changes in ownership may result in changes to the natural areas.

4.2.5 Public Services, Taxes & Utilities

Proposed Action: There would be minimal changes or need for increased public services in the property if FWP purchased the ranch. The existing natural gas extraction continues per the lease agreement. Mineral rights for oil and gas would remain with owners that have the subsurface rights. FWP would make property tax payments to Pondera and Toole Counties for fee title lands that are designated as a Wildlife Management Area. In 2007, the ranch paid \$754.79 to Pondera County and \$2,494.42 to Toole County. These amounts could decrease depending on the acreage of the property designated as a State Park.

Increased public recreational activities on the property could result in occasional need for emergency services such as search and rescue, emergency medical services, local law enforcement, and fire control and suppression.

Recreational activity on the property could result in the occasional need for emergency services such as search and rescue or emergency medical services administered through the County Sheriff.

No Action: If another buyer purchased the Lincoln Ranch under a possible subdivision development scenario, Pondera and/or Toole Counties may receive increased tax revenues in exchange for increased public services to new residences and new utility services. These services may be of some detriment to some wildlife species. However, the exact public service and utility needs of another buyer is unknown.

4.2.6 Cultural & Historical Resources

Proposed Action: If the sale of the property to FWP were completed, there would be no direct affects to cultural or historic resources on the property. A file search at the State Historic Preservation Office (SHPO) found there were no known recorded historic sites within the ranch. However, local knowledge of the property does acknowledge the Blackfoot Indians used the area for wintering sites. Tipi rings can be found on the bluffs above the river. Additionally, Meriwether Lewis crossed the Marias River in the area while fleeing the Blackfeet in 1806.

Finally, the building used by Mr. Lincoln as a residence is recorded as being built in 1940. According to SHPO, buildings over 50-years are considered historic and thus it is potentially eligible for listing on the National Register of Historic Places.

Indirect influences to cultural and historic sites within the property could encompass unauthorized artifact extractions and vandalism to the residence. FWP would attempt to discourage such activities by signage and community-based monitoring of the Property. Additionally, FWP may decide to remove the buildings because they are found to be unstable, pose public safety issues, and obsolete. FWP would consult with SHPO before removing the house to facilitate the process of removal and/or documenting its historic values.

No Action: It is uncertain if unrecorded historic sites would be affected by the activities of another owner than FWP.

4.3 Potential Long Term Impacts

If FWP were successful in purchasing the Lincoln Ranch, FWP would likely develop small, isolated parcels so that they may accommodate a visitor contact station, designated camping area, and interpretive sign, boat ramp for non-motorized floating activities, and primitive upriver boat accessible camping sites. Such formal improvements would likely impact some of the natural areas of the property. However since FWP's goals for the property are to maintain as much of the natural habitats and features as possible while providing the public access to it, FWP will strive to minimize any feasible negative impacts to wildlife and plant communities as well as geologic, cultural, and paleontological features and resources. Specific site development activities (campgrounds, boat launch facility, etc.) will require further environmental assessment as those activities are planned and funded.

The Lincoln property encompasses in excess of 8,800 acres. It is anticipated that fulltime FWP staffing will be required for site management. Only as funding becomes available to accommodate increased public use and maintain improvements can a complete management scenario be put in place. These funding and staffing issues will be discussed internally to discover the best option to meet the management goals of the property.

5.0 NEED FOR AN ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT STATEMENT

Based on the significance criteria evaluated in this EA, is an EIS required? No. If an EIS is not required, explain why the EA is the appropriate level of analysis for this proposed action.

Based upon the above assessment, which has identified a very limited number of minor impacts from the proposed action, an EIS is not required and an environmental assessment is the appropriate level of review.

6.0 PUBLIC PARTICIPATION

6.1 Public Involvement

The public will be notified in the following manners to comment on this current EA, the proposed action and alternatives:

- Two public notices in each of these papers: *Great Falls Tribune and The Shelby Promoter; and Helena Independent Record*
- One statewide press release;
- Direct mailing to adjacent landowners and interested parties;
- Public notice on the Fish, Wildlife & Parks web page: <http://fwp.mt.gov>.
- A public meeting to receive comment will be held.

Copies of this EA will be available for public review at FWP Region 4 Headquarters in Great Falls, at the FWP office in Conrad and on the FWP web site.

A public meeting will be scheduled during the public comment period to provide the public a venue to submit comments and have questions answered by FWP staff. This level of public notice and participation is appropriate for a project of this scope having few limited physical and human impacts.

6.2 Duration of Comment Period

The public comment period will extend for (21) twenty-one days beginning June 19, 2008. Written comments will be accepted until 5:00 p.m., July 10, 2008 and can be mailed to the address below:

Lincoln Ranch Acquisition
Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks
Region 4 Headquarters
4600 Giant Springs Road
Great Falls, MT 59405

Or email comments to: gbertellotti@mt.gov

Offices/Programs contacted or contributing to this document:

Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation
Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks: Fisheries, Parks and Wildlife Divisions, Lands Bureau,
and the Legal Bureau
Montana Natural Heritage Program
U.S.D.A. Natural Resources Conservation Service
Bureau of Land Management

7.0 EA PREPARATION

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